

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 419

CS 212 854

AUTHOR Salvatore, Anne
TITLE The Single-Topic Composition Class: Theory and Practice.
PUB DATE 21 Mar 91
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Modes; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Learning Motivation; Learning Processes; *Rhetoric; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Contextual Thinking; Discourse; *Rhetorical Competence; Topic Units; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and contextual awareness are now considered crucial for "good writing" by many writing researchers. It is time for writing instructors to stop conducting composition classes as though substantive knowledge is a far lesser issue than "rhetorical skill." Composition teachers can offer significant, in-depth topical knowledge as well as an accompanying conceptual framework and a knowledge of the discourse, by simply immersing the class in a single topic for a whole semester. Continued immersion in the focused topic will provide a gestalt or framework for the content knowledge, allowing the students to explore the various perspectives, to make connections, to perceive the topic's complexities, and to infer its recurrent questions. Use of a single topic, however, does not preclude teaching discourse conventions. A writing teacher does know and can point out, for example, that a social science article under consideration uses empirical studies and statistical evidence, while a philosophy article employs reasoning as evidence. Another benefit of using a single topic is that an in-depth treatment of complex ideas will excite students about the material, and help to motivate them. (Sample student evaluations and a list of readings with annotations for a "Personal Relationships Unit" are attached.) (PRA)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED333419

The Single-Topic Composition Class: Theory and Practice

by

Anne Salvatore

Rider College

Lawrenceville, New Jersey

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Anne Salvatore

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

CS212854

SESSION TITLE: The Role of Knowledge in the Composition Class

PAPER TITLE: The Single-Topic Composition Class: Theory and
Practice

Presented: Conference on College Composition and Communication
(CCCC), March 21, 1991

By: Anne Salvatore
Rider College

Traditionally, many composition courses have rested comfortably on the following assumptions: (1) that writing consists mainly of a set of generic skills; (2) that such skills can be taught outside of an immersion in relevant subject-matter within particular contexts; and (3) that these generic skills learned in freshman composition should be transferable across disciplines during a student's college career.

Because of these tacit assumptions, many of us have selected textbooks containing relatively short works arranged in rhetorical categories or in broad, loosely related thematic groupings. Typically, we have directed students to read one or two of these general-level essays (or, occasionally, a short story or poem) as a preparation for a class discussion of the topic, which would then lead to a writing assignment. To provide further support for the assignment, we might have taught a particular rhetorical skill, such as logical organization or "development," or perhaps some sentence level skills, by presenting a sample student paper, or a textbook example. In recent years, we might also have guided our students through

certain procedural skills. For example, we would say that we brainstorm a topic, draft some ideas into paragraphs, shift or extend ideas through revision, edit and proofread for surface errors. Even more recently, we might have suggested the recursiveness of this process, noting that several parts might be dealt with simultaneously or repeatedly during a piece of writing. All of these methods, and the textbooks incorporating them, have represented important and necessary steps in the developing field of writing pedagogy.

However, today the theoretical field has swept far ahead of these practices, even if many textbooks have not. Offering us a new set of assumptions, a number of researchers in cognitive psychology and composition studies now suggest, first, that what counts as "good writing" consists of more than generic, rhetorical skills, and more than a procedural knowledge of the writing process. Other kinds of knowledge, they conclude, may be far more important than we have assumed. Topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and contextual awareness are now considered by many researchers to be crucial. One of these researchers, Nancy Stein, has inferred from her investigations that "topic knowledge . . . is probably the most essential knowledge for the production of discourse" (43). James Reither asserts what he calls our "obligation" to bring "substantive knowing into our model of the process of writing"; he urges us to "find ways to immerse writing students in academic knowledge/discourse communities" (624). In the cognitive realm, Larkin, Heller, and Greeno, studying the nature of problem-solving, suggest that

"regardless of the sophistication of a solver's procedural and strategic knowledge, deficiencies in knowledge of facts, concepts, and principles constrain the scope of that individual's problem-solving ability" (59). Insofar as the act of composing is a problem-solving task, writers who lack topic knowledge may be likewise constrained.

Second, experiments have begun to show that generic skills which do exist in thinking and writing do not automatically transfer across disciplines. Hirsch asserts that "when the configuration of a task is significantly changed"¹⁾ [as it often is when a student moves from one discipline to the next], "past skills are not transferred to the new problem" (61). To support this contention, he refers us to an experiment with skilled chess players conducted by psychologist Adriaan de Groot. These players displayed an incredible ability to remember 90% of the positions of twenty-five chess pieces that were placed on the gameboard in an actual game set-up. But when the same pieces were placed randomly on the board, the same players could remember only 20% of the positions (Hirsch 61). Thus, when the context, which is a crucial part of the knowledge-base, changed significantly, the skill-level, even of experts, appeared to be drastically lower.

In another set of experiments, Joseph Williams studied the writing of law and medical students; he discovered a "predictable degradation of performance in writing" as these adult students confronted an unfamiliar discourse; performance improved as they became familiar with more of the conceptual paradigms in their fields. And using a very different age-group, Nancy Stein

determined that young children who seemed unable to summarize a story satisfactorily, could perform much better after the experimenter defined explicitly the elements of a good summary [discourse knowledge] (Stein 46-51). What these researchers are inferring from their studies, then, is that a knowledge of topic, discourse, and context plays an important role both in the generation of successful writing, and in the transfer of writing skills to new situations.

Many composition teachers have already perceived this intuitively or have become aware of it as a result of analyzing their students' writing or questioning them about their problems during individual conferences. A draft that consists almost entirely of generalizations, for example, may lack development at least partially because the student has no access to deeper aspects of the topic that could supply him or her with thoughtful ideas. Frequently, too, the problem of inadequate development can lead to organizational flaws. While helping students individually, many of us have seen them jump from one vague idea to another and back to the first at least partially as an effort to escape from an area in which they are uninformed. Of course, as many instructors in departments other than English will be the first to note, offering students a knowledge-base is hardly a panacea for poor writing performance, since many other complex factors are certainly involved in the problem. Also, at least some composition instructors have, from time to time, used a knowledge-base in composition without producing any miracle cures. But now, with empirical evidence and theoretical

grounding for this approach, it is time that we, as a profession, stopped conducting our composition classes as though substantive knowledge is a far lesser issue than "rhetorical skill."

The shift from "modes" to "themes" in many composition textbooks--though in itself a significant development--did not really change the texture of our classes either. In many books, the themes are quite vaguely titled (for example, "Work" or "Education") and the half-dozen or so selections under each are so loosely related that no deep topic knowledge can be garnered, few connections may be possible, and no meaningful framework can be set up.

How, then, can we as composition teachers offer our students significant, in-depth topical knowledge as well as an accompanying conceptual framework and a knowledge of the discourse so that they can improve their writing while they are in our classes? What sort of knowledge can we legitimately provide? One deceptively easy answer is that those of us with literary backgrounds could offer students a knowledge of literature as a writing base. But at many institutions where composition is treated as a service course, the difficulties of changing entrenched attitudes may prove daunting. To include some literature in a "composition" course may be acceptable at such institutions; to teach literature exclusively in the course may seem highly objectionable.

On the other hand, many of us have only general knowledge of fields outside our own specialty, and most of us assume we are unfamiliar with the discourse conventions of those other fields.

Should we then assume the impossibility of offering a real knowledge-base, and perhaps dispense with freshman composition altogether? Aside from the chaos and political suicide the latter course of action would entail, I believe that assuming impossibility would be a mistake. We can provide students--as well as ourselves--with topic knowledge by immersing the class in a single topic for a whole semester. Along with our students, we can learn about the topic in some depth by assembling our own collection of more narrowly focused readings on it, or by finding and reading a textbook which does the collecting for us: a few books do exist which provide enough closely related readings for a whole semester. It is true that the strategy may require more and different preparation than we might expect for a composition course. Yet, we routinely do our own learning and collecting of material for literature courses; we may even spend additional hours researching critical contributions to the selections we teach. Why should we be unwilling to do the same for a composition course? The learning or collecting would not need to be wholly re-done every semester: the same series of readings could be used as long as appropriate. For the students, as for us, continued immersion in the focused topic will provide a gestalt or framework for the content knowledge, allowing us to explore with them the varying perspectives, to help them make connections, to perceive the topic's complexities, and to infer its recurrent questions.

But even if knowledge of a topic and a context can improve the development of ideas in student writing, how can we be sure

that such development will transfer across disciplines unless we also teach discourse conventions? In recent years, a controversy has arisen between those who think composition teachers ought to be teaching discourse conventions, and those who think we are not at all qualified to teach them. I propose a middle ground.

At least some of what Peter Elbow calls the "deep structures" of a discourse can be analyzed and described as we examine the methods used in a particular reading selection. For example, the writing teacher does know and can point out to students that the social science article under consideration uses empirical studies and statistical evidence, while a philosophy article employs reasoning as evidence. Such basic discourse knowledge will help facilitate at least some minimal transfer of skills. This assumes, of course, that we are using approximate (if not too technical) examples of the discourses, rather than journalistic articles. In any case, as composition teachers, our foremost responsibility should be to demonstrate through such examples that differences between disciplines do exist. We cannot be held responsible for presenting these differences in their entirety; nor should we feel responsible for laying out all or even most of the conventions of any particular discourse. For this task, we need to engage teachers in other disciplines, to help make them conscious of the tacit conventions they have been using in their fields, and to teach these conventions to their students. Indeed, many WAC Programs have done much to spark an awareness of this need across the curriculum. As the awareness grows that discourse knowledge differs from topic knowledge,

which in turn cannot be isolated from context knowledge, the expectation of automatic and complete transfer of writing skills from one discipline to another will diminish. If we provide our own topic knowledge, perhaps what does transfer will be a new definition of writing as an art that requires real knowledge, as a skill that cannot be achieved without deep understanding and investigation of a topic in a specific framework.

Immersing students in a focused topic can cause some problems that need to be managed. Some students may resist having to read extensively and study in a composition course. Some may react to the challenging cognitive requirements with initial confusion. Some will have difficulty making connections among readings--connections that are crucial to generating a framework for the topic. But if tasks are consistently provided to generate connections and to show deepening relationships, college students at most ability levels can learn how to meet the challenges. As the semester progresses, the specter of the Undeveloped Freshman Paper will gradually become less common.

Another benefit of using a single topic is that such an in-depth treatment of complex ideas is almost sure to excite us about the material, and in turn, probably motivate our students better as well. At the end of the course, we will all know a good deal more about one idea than before--an outcome that we don't usually experience with the traditional composition course.

Will the students like the course? While I have done no empirical studies to compare students' responses to traditional courses with their responses to the single-topic course, I have

found through anonymous course evaluations that the greater majority of students do seem to appreciate the single topic, or at least the topics I have used, which include Personal Relationships and Free Choice. Of course, there are always some students who will not like composition class under any circumstances. The following are sample comments from the students: [Show overhead: "Sample Student Comments."]

Here is a sample reading list for a semester on "Personal Relationships": [Show overhead: "Readings for Personal Relationships Unit." While overhead is being viewed, explain how readings connect with one another.]

Distribute printed copies: Student Comments

Readings for Personal Relationships

Works Cited

- Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," College English 53 (1991): (135-55).
- Hirsch, E. D., Jr. Cultural Literacy. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Larkin, Jill H., Joan I. Heller, and James G. Greeno. "Instructional Implications of Research on Problem Solving." In New Directions for Teaching and Learning: Learning, Cognition, and College Teaching. Wilbert J. McKeachie, guest ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1980.
- Reither, James A. "Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process," College English 47 (1985): 620-28.
- Stein, Nancy. "Knowledge and Process in the Acquisition of Writing Skills." Paper delivered at the University of Chicago Conference, "Cognitive Strategies and Writing: A Dialogue Across Disciplines," May, 1986.
- Williams, Joseph. "What Can We Glean from Cognitive Research About Understanding and teaching Young Writers?" Paper delivered at the University of Chicago Conference,

"Cognitive Strategies and Writing: A Dialogue Across
Disciplines," May, 1986.

Sample Student Comments

QUESTION: How did you react to exploring several aspects of the same topic [PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS] throughout the semester? How do you think it affected your learning about the topic or writing about it?

I enjoyed spending the semester learning + writing about love. It is a topic I am interested in and I learned about the different perspectives in which people view love. The more time we spent discussing personal relationships, the easier they were to write about.

Keeping the same topic was good. Writing about it several different times kept up a better understanding of it. Since we stayed on the same topic I think I'll remember more about this course.

I didn't mind writing about the same topic of personal relationships, other helped you learn and maybe change your way of thinking or acting in a relationship.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

STUDENT REACTIONS

No ; I did not like keeping the same topic. I feel that the topic should be changed for each paper.

My papers became repetitive after a while.

I liked having the same topic for most of the semester but toward the end of the "love" part I became bored. ~~It~~ Everything became more interesting when we started discussing sexuality.

I loved exploring the same topic. I learned things about myself that I didn't really know until I wrote it down. It affected me in a very positive way. I'm really going to miss this class next semester.

Readings for Personal Relationships Unit

(From KNOWING AND WRITING: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSICAL QUESTIONS by Robert Reilly and Anne T. Salvatore; HarperCollins; Forthcoming: Fall, 1991)

Plato. "Aristophanes' Definition of Love." The Dialogues of Plato, I, Symposium

Solomon, Robert C. "Models and Metaphors: The Game of Love." Love: Emotion, Myth, and Metaphor

Carver, Raymond. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (story)

De Beauvoir, Simone. "The Woman in Love." The Second Sex

Hamilton, Edith. "Cupid and Psyche." Mythology (story)

Brooks, Romaine. "The Mummy" (drawing)

Goldberg, Herb. "Driving Each Other Crazy on the Way to Liberation." The New Male Female Relationship

Leavitt, David. "Territory" (story)

Saint Augustine. "On the Evil of Lust." City of God

Tannahill, Reay. "Sexuality in Early China." Sex in History

D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman. "The Sexualized Society." Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where the Shadow is Darkest." (poem)

Varo, Remedios. "Lovers." (painting)

Chekhov, Anton. "Lady with Lapdog." (story)

Russell, Bernard. "Marriage." Marriage and Morals

Menninger, Roy W. "Decisions in Sexuality: An Act of Impulse, Conscience, or Society?" Sexuality: A Search for Perspectives

Masters, William H., Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny. "The AIDS Virus and Sexuality." Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS

Connections Among Readings

The first three readings attempt to define love. Plato's classic story suggests that a pre-destined partner is available for everyone; the implication is that we need only find this partner to be happy forever. Solomon's presentation of many different definitions of love places Plato's in perspective as only one of many such beliefs, many of which are suspect when viewed alone. Carver's view is modernistic, showing the difficulty of attempting to define love, and the problems of applying inadequate definitions to our lives.

De Beauvoir opens a new issue by explaining the dependency of many women in love relationships. In Hamilton's classic myth, the stereotypical Psyche depends on Cupid for rescue and happiness; ideas on trust and jealousy in relationships are also raised. Romaine Brooks' drawing portrays a female figure overpowered by a dominant male. Goldberg recalls us to de Beauvoir's warnings, but he cautions that the solutions to stereotyping are not easily accomplished.

Leavitt sympathetically analyzes the emotional complexities in a homosexual relationship. Augustine represents the ultra-conservative Christian perspective prohibiting sex except for procreation, while Tannahill explains the ancient Taoist view on the value of frequent sex with many women.

D'Emilio and Freedman document the movement toward more liberal sexual practices in contemporary times; Oates views the merging of love and sex as ideal; Varo points to the dangers of focusing entirely on the self, while ignoring social issues, during a relationship.

Chekhov deals with a sexual relationship that is in opposition to society's rules. Like the ancient Chinese Taoists, Russell advocates changing the rules so that sex with other partners could co-exist with marriage.

Menninger explores psychological motivations for sexual choices, and Masters/Johnson/Kolodny warn of the dangers of AIDS to those choosing a sexual relationship.